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ABSTRACT

In the concept of writing as learning resides implications for the teaching of composition and reading. Writing's special value as a learning tool lies in the way it can help writers clarify the categories and relationships already in mind as they grapple with new information and ideas. One method that has been used to enable students to use writing as a connective and integrative process has been to employ a questioning technique that helps writers generate specific questions and use those questions in reading and analyzing texts. It begins with the articulation of a preliminary thesis from which a student can generate guiding questions in the selection and analysis of other sources. A second method includes the writing of rough drafts concurrently with the reading and exploration of texts. This can help the writer engage the specific material and can intensify the writer's personal interest in the material at hand. Teachers of writing courses can assist their students by showing how each subskill of the writing process is related to the other subskills and by offering writing within the student's discipline as an adjunct course involving workshops and tutorial conferences. (TJ)

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WRITING: A TOOL FOR LEARNING AND UNDERSTANDING

by

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Writing: A Tool for Learning and Understanding

The concept of writing as learning is now attracting increasing interest in college-level and high school composition courses. Janet Emig (1) has noted the power of writing as a means of connecting disparate realms of time and experience; J. L. Kinneavy (2) has observed the heuristic value of written communication as constituting a major aim of discourse in addition to such other aims as persuasion and self-expression. Frank Smith has commented upon the self-evaluative potential in the writing process: "The best way to examine our own thoughts, and to organize new ideas into productive parts of our knowledge of the world, is often to put them down on paper" (3).

In all of these facets of writing's function as a mode of learning reside implications for the teaching of composition and reading at many levels of education. In the following paper I shall explore several of the more practical implications for the teaching of these skills, and will also note some of the related trends in cross-disciplinary reading and writing instruction.

In broad terms, writing's special value as a learning tool lies in the way it can help a person clarify the categories and relationships already in his mind as he grapples with new information and ideas. By transforming concepts and mental images into graphic symbols, the writer allows for a continuous process of integration (i.e., of ideas and information) and analysis (of the language in which the concepts are expressed). One often finds——in critical judgments about prose and prose style——comments directly related to a writer's handling of conceptual relationships; as Thomas DeQuincey observed of the prose of Edmund Burke, "His great and peculiar

distinction was that he viewed all objects of understanding under more relations than other men, and under more complex relations" (4).

Instructional Techniques

In writing courses, the challenge to instructors is to provide specific approaches which can enable their students to use writing as a connective and integrative process. One method currently used in the Basic Writing Program of the University of California, Riverside employs a question-asking technique which enables a writer to generate specific questions from his or her own language, and then to use those questions in reading and analyzing texts. Based upon the generative principles of Francis Christensen's rhetoric of the paragraph (5), the method is equally applicable to both composition and reading classes, since it combines writing and reading in one unified process.

The method (which comprises a writing process model in its entirety), begins with the articulation of a preliminary thesis; from the thesis itself the writer can generate questions which guide him or her in the selection and analysis of source material. Because college-level basic writers (and many high school students as well) have difficulty formulating thesis statements, they will often need some preliminary work in identifying and expressing main ideas in proposition form before they actually begin working with the writing process. They need to understand that they already possess the resources and knowledge to express preliminary theses of a high order of generality, and that through the writing process itself they can refine and qualify those statements. An instructor can assist them in this process through tutorial dialogues and group-writing techniques. Recently I asked a basic writing class to assess the positive and negative effects of television viewing, and the students, as a group, volunteered

the following oral opinions:

> "It's (television viewing) all right as long as it doesn't become an addiction."
>
> "TV can extend a person's knowledge of the world."
>
> "TV viewing can also broaden your experience."
>
> "You really have to be selective if it's going to have any value."

It took little reworking to convert the raw material of oral opinion into a preliminary hypothesis about television's effects:

> Television viewing can be detrimental to a viewer if it becomes an addiction. But if the viewer watches selectively, TV can be a valuable extension to a person's knowledge and experience.

By shaping their opinions into graphic form, the writers in the class equipped themselves to examine different sources with a high degree of purpose and precision. The preliminary thesis they expressed allowed for an analysis of each word, of each statement, and the result was a set of questions which they could apply to different texts:

1. What are the various modes (or patterns) of television viewing?
2. In what way (or ways) can excessive TV viewing harm a viewer?
3. What constitutes an addiction to television?
4. What constitutes selective viewing?
5. In what <u>specific</u> ways can television extend a person's knowledge and experience?

Once they had analyzed the commitment of the thesis in this way, the students could survey pertinent articles and books to determine which sources would answer particular questions. They could discriminate important from less important information on the basis of whether or not the material would provide answers to their questions. In discussing the topic of television's values, the basic writing students examined an article written by Newton and

Nell Minow on television's educational potential (6). They noted how the article provided no facts or ideas which could usefully answer their first four questions, but that the Minows' discussion of television's power and range provided useful material for answering the fifth question. The Minows noted, for example, how Joan Ganz Cooney, the creator of Sesame Street, began working with television after her experiences as a Head Start teacher had convinced her that programs such as Head Start simply were not reaching all the children who could benefit from them.

Once a source had been read, the writer could revise the thesis to incorporate newly-acquired information or to express a revision of the main idea. Thus a reading of the Minows' article suggested the following change in the original thesis:

> "Television viewing can be detrimental to a viewer if it becomes an addiction. But if the viewer watches selectively, TV can be a valuable extension to a person's knowledge and experience. Moreover, it has a range-a power to reach and educate-not shared by many other media.

The Process of Revision

This question-asking technique, therefore, provides one method of connecting a writer's existing knowledge to new information and source material, and offers a specific application of the concept of writing as a learning tool. Yet this concept can affect other aspects of the writing process as well, including the production of rough and revised drafts. For a long period of time, a period extending at least as far back as Aristotle's Rhetorica, rhetoricians have advised their students to master the subjects of their discourses thoroughly before attempting to speak or write to an audience. Lois and Selma DeBakey offer advice along similar lines when they

suggest the following to potential grant-proposal writers: "Jumping the gun in expository writing is usually disastrous. Starting to write before you have done adequate preliminary bibliographic research or have thought through the proposal consecutively from beginning to end is like constructing a building without a blueprint" (7).

Although this advice can have value in several specific instances, the function of writing as learning does permit the commencing of rough drafts even before much research is done. The writing of rough drafts concurrently with the reading and exploration of texts can help raise questions in the writer's mind as he or she engages with specific materials, and the writing of such drafts can also help intensify the writer's personal interest in the subject at hand. The instructor needs to reinforce the idea that revision is a natural and appropriate process at secondary or higher levels of education, and that the writing process itself helps to formulate and shape one's emerging understanding of a subject or problem. On a practical level, the concurrent writing and researching of a paper can also help many new writers handle the problem of exploring enough source material while still leaving sufficient time for the writing itself.

Implications for the Curriculum

Because the use of writing as a learning instrument demands the mastery of many subskills, secondary teachers and teachers of college-level basic writing courses can assist their students immeasurably by showing how each subskill of the writing process (e.g., the ability to read for the main idea, the ability to produce complex sentence structures) is related to the other subskills. Lunsford (8) and others (9) observed the correlation between low reading and writing scores, and their observations make clear the need for

patterns of individualized instruction which address each student's strengths and weaknesses. Through the kind of instruction made possible by a writing lab environment, students can acquire fluency in expression while still developing the editorial competence needed to revise and perfect their papers.

On a broader level, the programs and courses which offer writing instruction within the disciplines provide an ideal medium through which students can master the use of writing as a mode of learning. Many students are already familiar with the unique learning process that takes place when they become actively engaged with a writing project assigned in a course in one of the disciplines. Often beginning with hazy or highly general notions of their subjects, they observe the gradual unfoldment and development of their ideas as the projects move from their inception to their later stages. By providing assistance to these students in special adjunct courses, writing and learning center instructors can help facilitate this process for the students, showing them specific ways in which their ideas can be focussed or their expression refined. Usually such adjunct courses involve workshops and tutorial conferences in which the students receive specific help on the papers required in other courses; the connection of writing instruction to these courses also helps to foster the students' interest in their own powers of communication.

In addition to the writing adjunct model, other course structures have been developed which can enhance and encourage the use of writing as learning. As noted in a recent directory of interdisciplinary writing and reading course models (10), there are now faculty development programs which provide assistance to faculty in the natural and social sciences as well as in the

humanities; one such program at the University of Northern Colorado offers specific methods and techniques by which faculty in a variety of fields can help their students improve their writing and reading skills. Such programs aid faculty in maximizing the instructional value of their writing and reading assignments.

Although it is difficult to predict the future directions of such programs and courses, the growing interest in writing as an instrument of learning has had the beneficial effect of bringing faculty in diverse fields together with reading and writing instructors. The sharing of techniques and knowledge has given reading and writing specialists a new understanding of the language of specific disciplines, and the teachers in those disciplines have in turn been acquiring methods of enhancing their own students' knowledge. Thus the dialogue which began with a common concern over literacy has evolved into a far-reaching examination of language itself: as a medium of communication and as a potent tool of inquiry and exploration.

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